

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 7, 2012

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
212A Whitten Building  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We are writing to request your implementation of the recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommendations for addressing human-caused wildfires near the Arizona-Mexico border. We believe this matter deserves your utmost attention, as Forest Service officials predict southern Arizona faces another above-average fire season this year.

As you know, last November 22, GAO released a report entitled “*Arizona Border Region: Federal Agencies Could Better Utilize Law Enforcement Resources in Support of Wildland Fire Management Activities*.” Along with Senators Murkowski and Barrasso, we asked GAO to examine all border wildfires between 2005 and 2010 – and GAO found that federal land agencies are not following their internal policy of investigating all human-caused wildfires on federal lands. In fact, only 18 percent of all human-caused wildfires larger than 1 acre in size were formerly investigated. Agency officials concluded that about half of these fires were started by illegal border crossers.

The Department of the Interior (DOI) has acknowledged GAO’s findings, and has outlined specific plans to implement its recommendations. These include:


- Increasing the number of DOI fire investigators at the border;
- Strengthening the documentation and statistical analysis of all human-caused fires;
- Launching a fire prevention campaign aimed at Spanish-speaking people via print, radio, and television; and
- Standardizing fire-response policies so that firefighters aren’t unnecessarily delayed due to a lack of DOI law enforcement escorts.

While DOI’s efforts represent a positive step forward by the federal government, GAO noted that a sizeable number of border wildfires occur on Forest Service land inside the Coronado National Forest. The 2011 fire season was one of the most catastrophic in Arizona history; in southern Arizona, the Monument Fire, Horseshoe Two Fire, and Murphy Complex Fire together burned more than 250,000 acres last year. According to federal investigation

reports, these three fires were all “human-caused,” and the ignition sites were within miles of the Mexican border – on Forest Service land.

Clearly, this is a gravely serious matter, and we urge you to prioritize Forest Service resources in the areas of prevention, suppression, and investigations at the Arizona-Mexico border. Please report back to us with detailed information on how the Forest Service intends to implement GAO’s recommendations.

Sincerely,



John McCain  
United States Senator



Jon Kyl  
United States Senator